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TAGS: PGOV EC
SUBJECT: COASTAL YOUTH ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT NEW U.S.
ADMINISTRATION

Classified By: Consul General Douglas Griffiths for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: To celebrate President Barack Obama,s inauguration, Consulate General Guayaquil invited 25 young Ecuadorian leaders to participate in an informal discussion on what his election means for the world. The participants uniformly applauded the fact that the U.S. had elected an African-American candidate who had so successfully energized our country,s youth. They expressed optimism that the Obama administration would seek to improve relations with Latin America, but tempered their sentiments with a realistic acknowledgement that other issues would probably occupy the President,s time in the short term. The participants praised the orderly transfer of power in the U.S. and expressed their frustration at the decades of turmoil that have wracked Ecuador. Reflecting the growing unease on the coast for President Rafael Correa,s polemic dialogue and foreign policy direction, the young leaders (even those in government) roundly criticized Correa,s recent trips to Iran and Cuba. END SUMMARY.

YOUNG COASTAL LEADERS EXCITED ABOUT OBAMA PRESIDENCY...

¶2. (U) As part of its celebration of President Obama,s inauguration on January 20, Consulate General Guayaquil organized a representational event at the Consul General,s house, to which it invited a group of Ecuadorians from three different cities who are under the age of 35 and future leaders in their respective fields. Twenty-five of Ecuador,s rising stars in journalism, politics/government, education, civil society, sports and music attended and participated in a series of small discussion groups led by Consulate entry-level officers that focused on the significance of Barack Obama,s election for the U.S. and Latin America.

¶3. (C) As a group, the invited guests expressed delight at Obama,s victory, opining that it gave hope to people from minority and/or disenfranchised groups around the world. They were thrilled at the idea of an African-American president who connects with and motivates young people. Several young leaders commented on President Obama,s use of YouTube and Facebook during his campaign. The participants also expressed hope regarding the impact of Obama,s election in Latin America. They noted that former President Bush only visited Colombia in his eighth year in office and when he thought of the hemisphere, seemed to focus only on Mexico and Central America. The guests felt that President Obama,s stated plans to rely more on diplomacy as a tool in international relations will help him pursue a more collaborative and constructively involved policy in the region.

...BUT WARY THAT EXPECTATIONS MAY BE TOO HIGH

¶4. (C) Although hopeful that President Obama will be able to achieve what he promised during the 2008 campaign, the young leaders who participated in the chat tempered their optimism with concerns that the world might be setting the bar too

high for him. They noted that it may be difficult for the President to maintain such high approval ratings in the face of difficult challenges, such as the economic crisis and the Iraq War. In addition, the participants acknowledged that the President would likely have to focus on domestic economic issues first, leaving global concerns on the back burner initially. They believe that Latin America will not be a priority at first, as the new administration will probably be focused on more pressing concerns in the Middle East.

Despite their hopes for improved U.S.-Ecuador relations, the young leaders were skeptical that a more permanent trade agreement (something for which many Ecuadorians still hope) would be a priority.

PARTICIPANTS EXPRESS ADMIRATION FOR U.S. POLITICAL PROCESS

¶15. (C) The invited guests uniformly commended the U.S. for its open political process and its orderly transfer of power.

Just as many Ecuadorians expressed surprise at the fact that former President Bush and John McCain called President Obama to congratulate him on Election Night, the participants in the chat were impressed that Bush and Obama shared the same stage in the Inauguration and that Obama complimented Bush during his address. They were similarly impressed that a U.S. president would choose a Secretary of Defense who had been a member of the previous administration. They contrasted the smooth transition to a new government in the U.S. with Ecuador's checkered history of overthrowing presidents before the end of their terms. &If only we could learn from your system,⁸ said one participant.

ECUADORIAN GOVERNMENT DRAWS SIGNIFICANTLY LESS PRAISE

¶16. (C) In addition to lambasting their country's political system, many of the participants were also highly critical of President Rafael Correa's government. They pointed to Obama's success at pursuing policies of openness and inclusion and derided the Ecuadorian president for dividing the country through his persistent attacks and negativity. The guests also blasted Correa for reaching out to Iran and Cuba during recent trips to both countries. Surprisingly, three participants who hold political appointee positions in the government cautiously joined in on the criticism of the trips. They wondered about the President's reaching out to countries that shared few values with Ecuador. (Note: These comments reflect a continuing regional divide, since young people in the highlands would likely have been much more positive about Correa. They also reflect class divides as most of our guests were either middle class or striving to join the middle class.)

BIG OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE U.S. IMAGE IN ECUADOR

¶17. (C) COMMENT: The election of a popular new President who has promised a more collaborative approach to the world has coastal Ecuadorians yearning for a closer relationship with the U.S., and Ecuadorians are probably now more receptive than ever to U.S. outreach, programs and messages. With heightened attention to what we are doing, efforts by the USG to show that we are taking an active interest in Ecuador will be noted.

GRIFFITHS